



The Hartford- Brainard Airport A Visioning Plan for Its Future

Executive Summary
2022

CITY OF
HARTFORD

WXY


KARP STRATEGIES
URBAN PLANNING ADVISORS

Executive Summary

This visioning plan explores potential paradigms for the reuse and reimagining of Hartford's Brainard-Airport, a 200-acre, publicly owned site strategically located at the junction of Interstate 91, Interstate 84, and State Route 5 three miles south of Downtown Hartford. The study was commissioned by the City of Hartford in early 2022 and led by WXY studio with Karp Strategies.

This effort set out to answer three critical questions:

- 1. What potential alternate uses would be suitable for the Hartford-Brainard Airport?*
- 2. How feasible are these uses given infrastructure challenges and financial considerations?*
- 3. How can these potential uses serve as a catalyst for Hartford's larger goals, as expressed in Hartford's 2035 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD)?*

To answer these three questions, the team worked alongside the city and key stakeholders to investigate the potential for the airport site's long-term redevelopment. Over the course of eight weeks, the team conducted a site visit to the airport, undertook background research on the site and past plans, developed case study research on similar or comparable sites, interviewed multiple regional developers, held one-on-one interviews with stakeholders, and hosted two focus groups. Public outreach and stakeholder interviews paralleled a market analysis led by Karp Strategies that researched current market conditions and provided a foundation for understanding the viability of different potential uses for the site.

Public outreach and market analysis informed a variety of development paradigms and an evaluation matrix against which different potential uses were scored. Three potential development paradigms were considered in greater detail: a logistics and distribution

center; a mixed use activity center; and an advanced manufacturing, R&D, and aviation technology hub. The conclusion of this report illustrates a hypothetical implementation timeline, which includes suggestions for future action by the City and its partners.

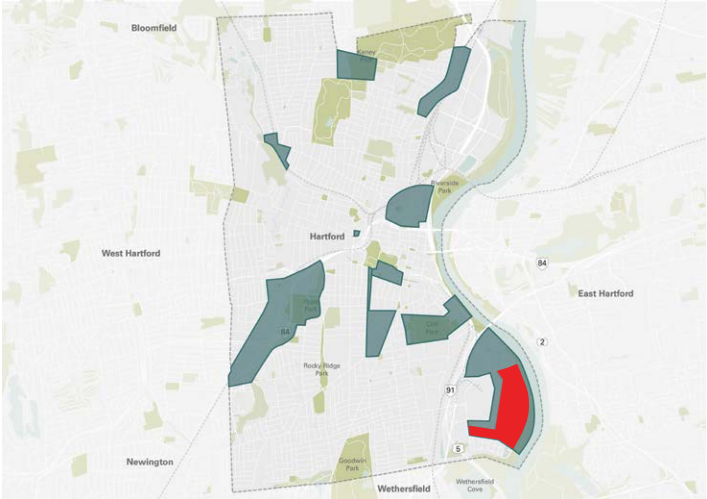
Site Context

A former flood plain and cow pasture along the Connecticut River situated within the larger South Meadows industrial area, the Hartford-Brainard airport, originally known as Brainard Field, was inaugurated in 1921 and was among the nation's first municipal airfields. As commercial air travel expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, a new regional airport, Hartford's Bradley International Airport, opened north of the city, causing Brainard to lose commercial air traffic in 1958. A significant portion of the original airport was converted to the South Meadows industrial park in the 1950s, further eroding its significance. Today, the airport is primarily used by recreational pilots, flight schools, and a cluster of aviation-related business enterprises. The airport is managed by the Connecticut Airport Authority (CAA) and the State of Connecticut.

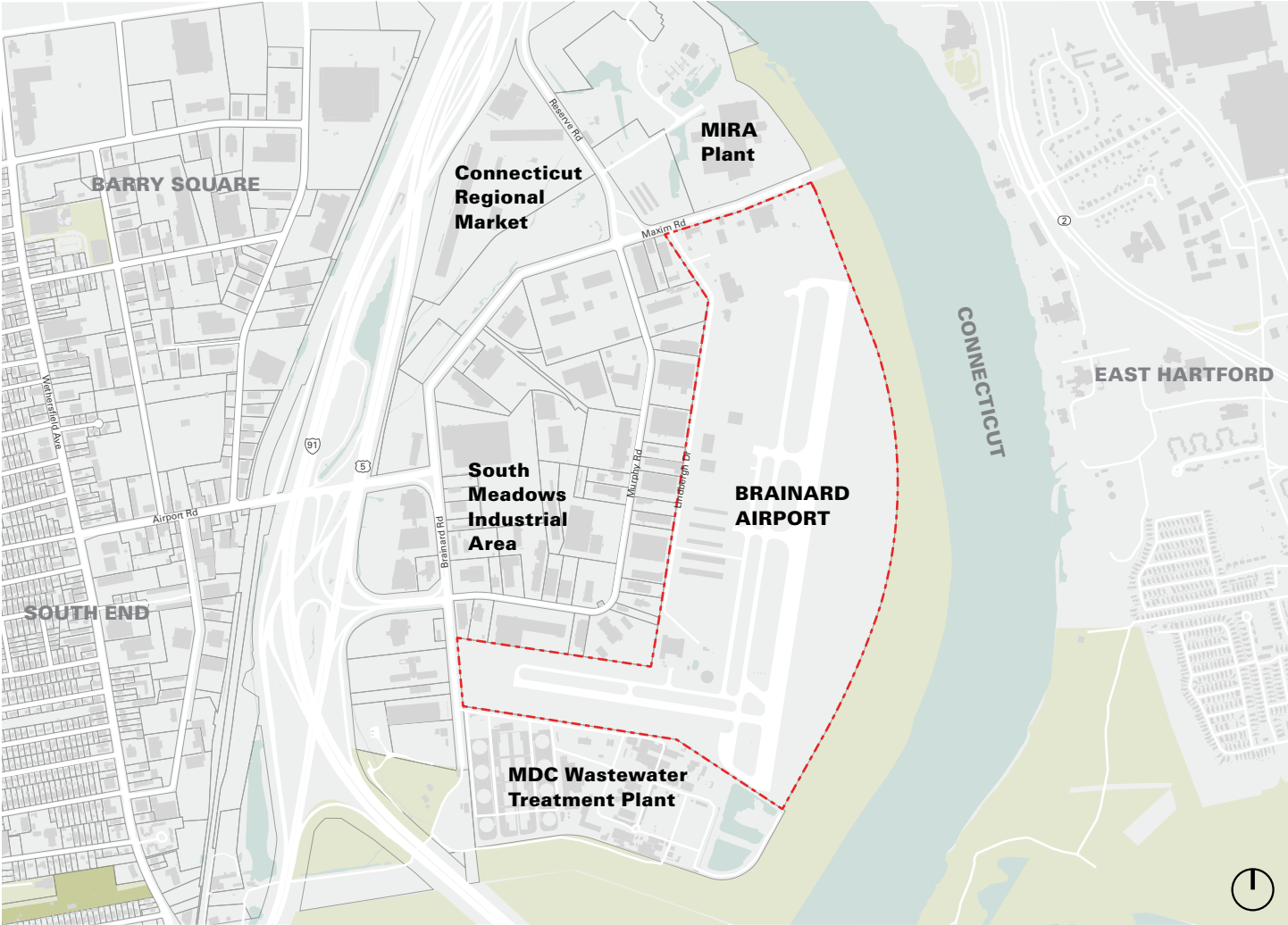
Brainard airport is surrounded by multiple pieces of urban infrastructure, including the Connecticut Regional Market, Metropolitan District Commission's (MDC) Wastewater Treatment Plant to the south, a trash-to-energy production facility operated by the Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority (MIRA) to the north, Eversource properties for power management and distribution, and the South Meadows Industrial Park. As a result of multiple, devastating floods in the first half of the 20th century, during the 1930's, a 32-foot levee was built to protect the site as a part of a larger flood control strategy implemented for the region. This levee is today maintained and operated by the Greater Hartford Flood Control Commission in partnership with the City and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Hartford's 2035 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD)

The POCD set forth key focus areas for future development in the city. The South Meadows Industrial Area and the Hartford-Brainard Airport were specifically called out in the plan as one of ten transformative projects of focus for Hartford's future revitalization.



Hartford Brainard Airport



While divided by highway infrastructure from surrounding areas, the site sits adjacent to multiple Hartford neighborhoods and neighboring jurisdictions, including the Sheldon-Charter Oak neighborhood to the north, the South End neighborhood to the West, historic Old Wethersfield to the south, and East Hartford, including the Goodwin University campus and the Pratt & Whitney campus to the east.

Planning Context

Appetite for redevelopment of the airport and the evaluation of potential alternate uses has been contemplated before. As far back as the early 1900s, the airport's current site was envisioned as a new residential area at the outskirts of the growing city (Carrère & Hastings, 1912). More recently, in 2006, the MDC produced a study exploring the reuse of the site (including the MIRA plant) as a seven million square foot mixed use center. In 2016, the Connecticut State Legislature released a staff report recommending that the airport maintain its current use, citing the economic benefits of the current airport use and the risks associated with undertaking a costly redevelopment.

The report did not include a rigorous market analysis, but looked at high level existing market conditions and feasibility. By contrast, Hartford's 2035 Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) specifically called out the reuse of the airport and the South Meadows area as a priority, including it in its list of ten transformative projects. The POCD included multiple goals that resonate with the feedback garnered during this study and the programmatic opportunities offered by the Brainard airport site. These include:

- *Green400: River* – Begin reconnecting Hartford to the River.
- *Grow400: Development* – Build the Ten Transformative Projects.
- *Grow400: Entrepreneurship* – Grow innovation ecosystem in anchor industries.
- *Grow400: Knowledge* – Connect colleges to advanced manufacturing growth.
- *Play400: Sports* - Build a new, large recreational center or centers.

In August 2021, Hartford's City Council, with the support of the Mayor, passed a resolution to explore the potential reuse of the airport site, with the intent



*Image: Hartford Brainard Airport
(as seen from the levee)*

of envisioning a new use that could generate more tax revenue for the City of Hartford, provide greater economic and community benefit to city residents, and make better use of the existing site, which is roughly equivalent in size to the City's Downtown. As an outgrowth of that resolution, the City established a task force known as the South Meadows Area Redevelopment Task Force (SMART) to debate the future of the airport. This report was produced in parallel to and in support of those recommendations.

In early 2022, during the production of this report, the State passed a bill in the General Assembly to undertake a \$1.5M study of potential alternative uses and site conditions for the airport, which will be managed by the Department of Economic Community Development (DECD) and initiated in late 2022.

Approach & Evaluation Matrix

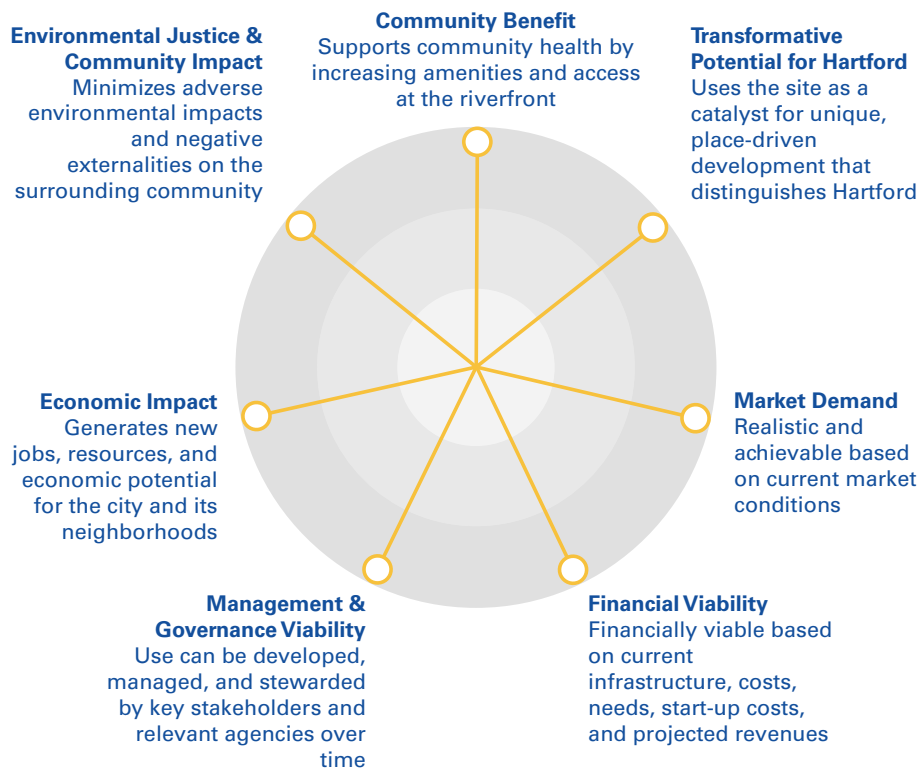
This report considered the airport's potential uses through multiple lenses, which were encapsulated and scored against an evaluation matrix. The matrix was developed based on stakeholder feedback,

conversations with the City, and the market analysis.

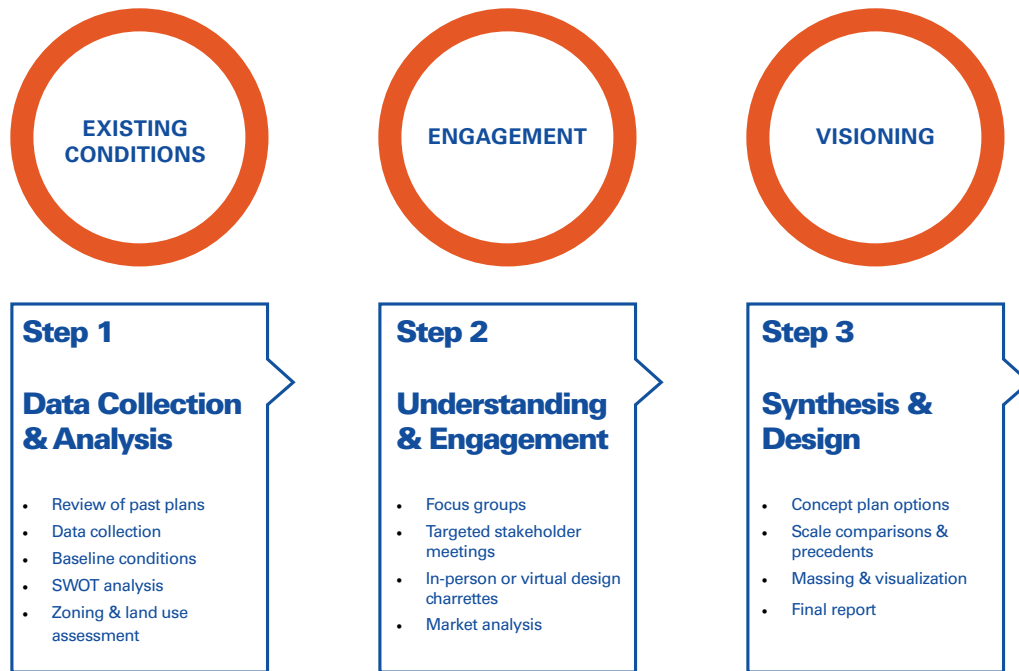
For each potential use, the team evaluated the development paradigm against several criteria, including:

- Community Benefit
- Economic Benefit
- Financial Viability
- Market Demand
- Transformative Potential for Hartford
- Environmental Justice & Community Impact
- Management & Governance Viability

Potential uses for evaluation were determined based on stakeholder interviews and outreach conducted during the study and supported by initial market research. The team's stakeholder outreach, while brief, provided a foundation for future engagement and opened the conversation about the potential future of the airport. Future studies and development plans will require additional, deeper engagement to fully flesh out a vision for the site moving forward.



Project Timeline



Stakeholder Engagement

Over the course of the project’s eight week timeframe, stakeholder engagement helped inform the plan’s overall vision and establish core themes and principles for the project. The team held an initial workshop with city staff to identify opportunities and constraints. This was followed by semi-structured one-on-one interviews, including multiple interviews with local real estate brokers and development experts, and two virtual focus groups, which used the interactive charretting tool Miro to explore site constraints and opportunities, while testing potential uses for the site.

While the accelerated project schedule did not allow for the type of in-depth engagement that typically accompanies a comprehensive planning process, this initial research helped identify key themes, ideas, opportunities, and constraints for the site. The outreach process also provided significant information for and insight on existing market conditions and demand, which served as groundwork for the market analysis in the report.

The initial engagement process revealed several key themes and takeaways.

1. Public access to the river is critical.

Providing public access, recreation, destinations, and connectivity along the riverfront is a priority for residents and the region and could be implemented prior to large scale redevelopment. While Hartford is a city with rich parks and open spaces, direct neighborhood riverfront access opportunities are lacking.

2. Complement. Don’t compete.

The site’s proximity to downtown and other ongoing development makes it unique, but could also create unwanted competition between downtown development (especially multi-family residential) and the site’s proposed use. The proposed use should connect and complement other initiatives as much as possible.

3. Connect to neighborhoods and institutions.

The site can connect to surrounding institutions and developments, including the Connecticut Regional Market, Goodwin University across the river in East Hartford, and the Sheldon-Charter Oak, and South End neighborhoods, as well as Trinity College, UConn, and Hartford Hospital, among others.

4. Environmental challenges exist.

The site faces numerous environmental challenges, including the presence of coal tar that needs to be remediated, the levee to prevent flooding, and surrounding urban infrastructure that will need to be buffered or redeveloped over time. Future uses that increase truck traffic and reinforce environmental justice concerns should be critically analyzed for their overall public benefit and community impact.

5. Create good jobs and connect people to them.

Whatever the use, making the public site into something that can help bolster the lives of local residents and increase their access to jobs and opportunities is critical. New connections to industry, manufacturing, and education could be transformative for the city. Site access, including access by public transportation, should be a priority in any new development scheme.

Below: Image of "Word Cloud exercise generated by focus group participants



Community Stakeholders:

- Riverfront Recapture
- Capital Region Education Council (CREC)
- Transport Hartford / Bici CO
- East Coast Greenway
- NRZ - CSS/CON Leadership (Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon-Charter Oak Neighborhood)
- NRZ - MARG Leadership (Maple Avenue Revitalization Group)
- NRZ - South End Leadership
- Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) Connecticut
- iQuilt Partnership

Market/Real Estate Interviews:

- CBRE Industrial Broker focused on Hartford
- Commercial real estate broker on SMART Taskforce (eXp Realty)
- Sentry Commercial
- Winstanley Enterprises
- Shelbourne
- Coltsville Redevelopment Company
- Spinnaker Real Estate

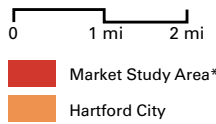
Agency & Institutional Stakeholders:

- CT DOT
- CT Transit
- Capital Region Council of Governments (CROG)
- Greater Hartford Flood Control Commission
- City of Hartford Complete Streets Taskforce
- Goodwin University
- Metropolitan District Commission (MDC)
- Eversource
- Town of Wethersfield
- National Park Service (Coltsville National Historic Park)
- Town of East Hartford
- Army Corps of Engineers

Market Context



* The "Study Area" is defined by the Census tracts encompassing South Meadows and the immediately adjacent residential neighborhoods.



As part of the overall study, the team produced a high level market analysis to better understand how existing market conditions in the Study Area*, City of Hartford, and the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) might impact potential airport reuse (see report Appendix 5.5 for further detail on geography and methods).

Quantitative data was sourced through the Census and American Community Survey via Social Explorer; CoStar; and ESRI Business Analyst. Additional insights were provided by real estate expert interviews.

Findings

In addition to assessing market realities, the analysis considered the unique nature of the site. Namely, its size, central location, and proximity to regional transportation assets beg the question: what can the market bear to do at Hartford-Brainard that *could not be accomplished elsewhere?*

Overall, the analysis provided five important takeaways to inform the visioning plan:



Industrial real estate in the MSA is strong and among the fastest-expanding across New England metros. Demand for logistics/distribution space leads the market (82% of

current construction is in this sector), with related jobs also growing significantly in warehousing/storage (see Table 2 on page 9).



Retail demand remains relatively stable, with high occupancy but no upward pressure on rental prices, suggesting no excess need.



Significant Class A **multifamily** development is taking place in the City, where 96% of multifamily buildings reported under 4% vacancy. Experts attribute low vacancy to unmet demand caused by limited development from the 1980s until 2010.



It is estimated that more than one-half of households making under 30% of the area median income (AMI) cannot afford their rents. At the same time, 83% of households making more than 80% AMI could pay more, potentially indicating that lower-earning families are crowded out of **affordable housing**.



The demolition of older **office** stock in the City has caused a drop in inventory. Rents and occupancy have also decreased in recent years. Experts corroborated the current lack of interest in new office projects associated with the uncertainty of future work trends.

Opportunity

Opportunity exists to build a mix of uses, focused on targeted industrial real estate and new housing. Adding industrial space focused on growing industries related to logistics/distribution leverages the central location and large size of the site for these land intensive uses, while providing economic opportunity and access to new jobs. Table 02 notes additional growth industries

- beyond warehousing and storage - which could also flexibly make use of new industrial space. Adding housing at a range of income levels leverages the central location and transportation access for future residents, while increasing needed housing stock for lower-earning families.

Table 01. Summary, Real Estate Trends in the Hartford MSA (% Change, 2011-2021)

















	INVENTORY	OCCUPANCY	RENT
 INDUSTRIAL	+5% 	+4% 	+40% 
 MULTIFAMILY	+15% 	+2% 	+30% 
 RETAIL	+4% 	+2% 	+16% 
 OFFICE	-1% 	+1% 	+1% 

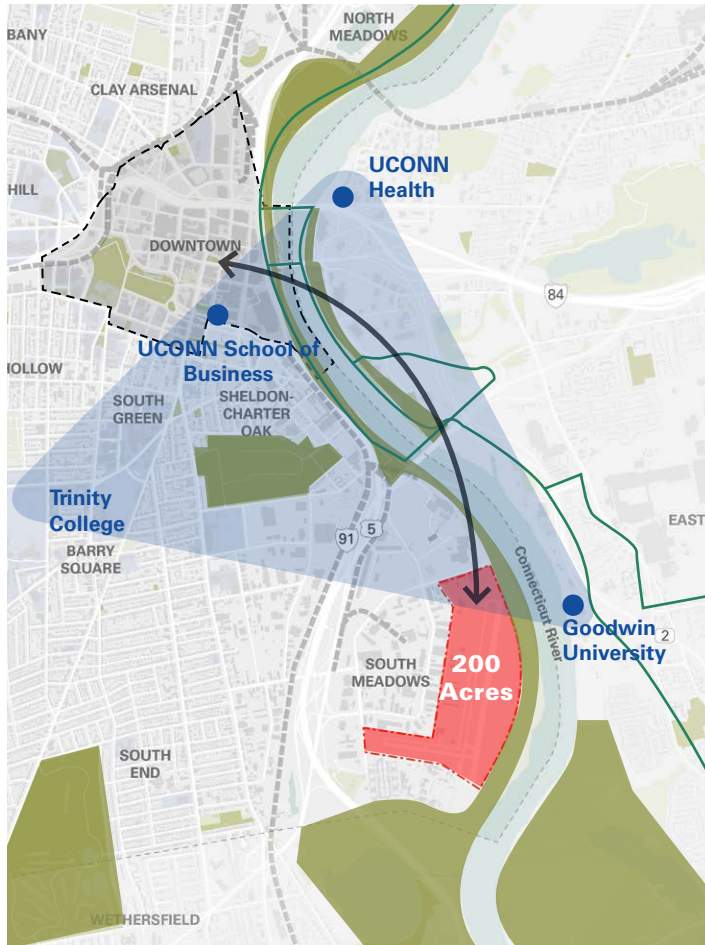
Table 02. Job Growth in Select Growing Industries, Hartford MSA (2011-2021)

INDUSTRY	JOB IN 2011	JOB IN 2021	# CHANGE	% CHANGE
Warehousing and storage	11,783	27,667	15,884	135%
Electronic shopping and mail-order houses	426	1,696	1,270	298%
Power generation and supply *	NA	1,216	1,215	NA
R&D (physical, engineering, and life sciences)	2,285	3,308	1,023	45%
Breweries *	NA	942	941	NA
Pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing	953	1,613	660	69%
Wineries *	NA	157	156	NA

* 2011 data not available

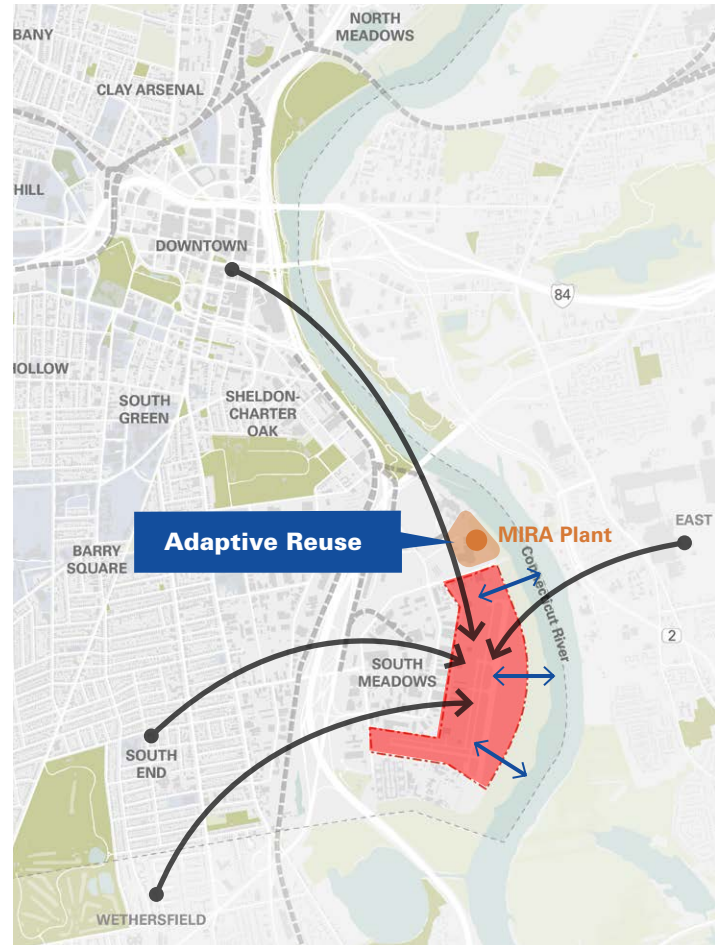
Site Understanding

Strengths



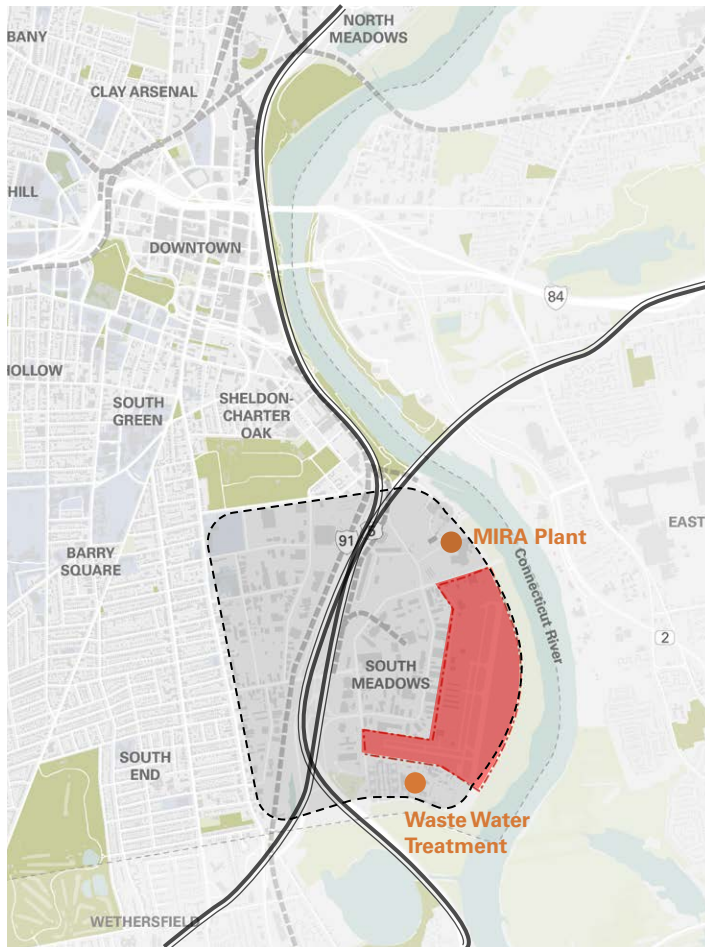
- Unique site location & scale with direct access to major interstate highways and state roads
- Access to riverfront, trails & natural assets
- Embedded in a strong institutional landscape
- Surrounded by cultural activities and historic neighborhoods

Opportunities



- Potential for direct riverfront connections & destinations, including reuse of levee and tow path along river
- Opportunity for adaptive reuse & placemaking, especially with MIRA plant
- Job creation and new economic activity
- Better connections to transit, including potential transit hub location

Weaknesses



- Highways and rail as visual & physical barriers
- Industrial character, traffic & pollution concerns, including adjacent South Meadows Industrial Area
- Key adjacencies like wastewater treatment plant, MIRA plant and highways
- Environmental concerns, especially with ground contamination and coal tar
- Lack of pedestrian or bike connections to surrounding neighborhoods and downtown

Threats



- Neighboring municipalities with lower tax rates and more greenfield sites
- Constituencies that would prefer to maintain existing airport use/status quo
- Costs associated with laying infrastructural groundwork to attract development potential
- Market conditions and context that may not support new mixed use construction

Connectivity & Open Space

Connectivity and open space were cited as key opportunities for the site and frequently arose as a theme during engagement. Numerous groups pointed to the opportunity for new regional connections.

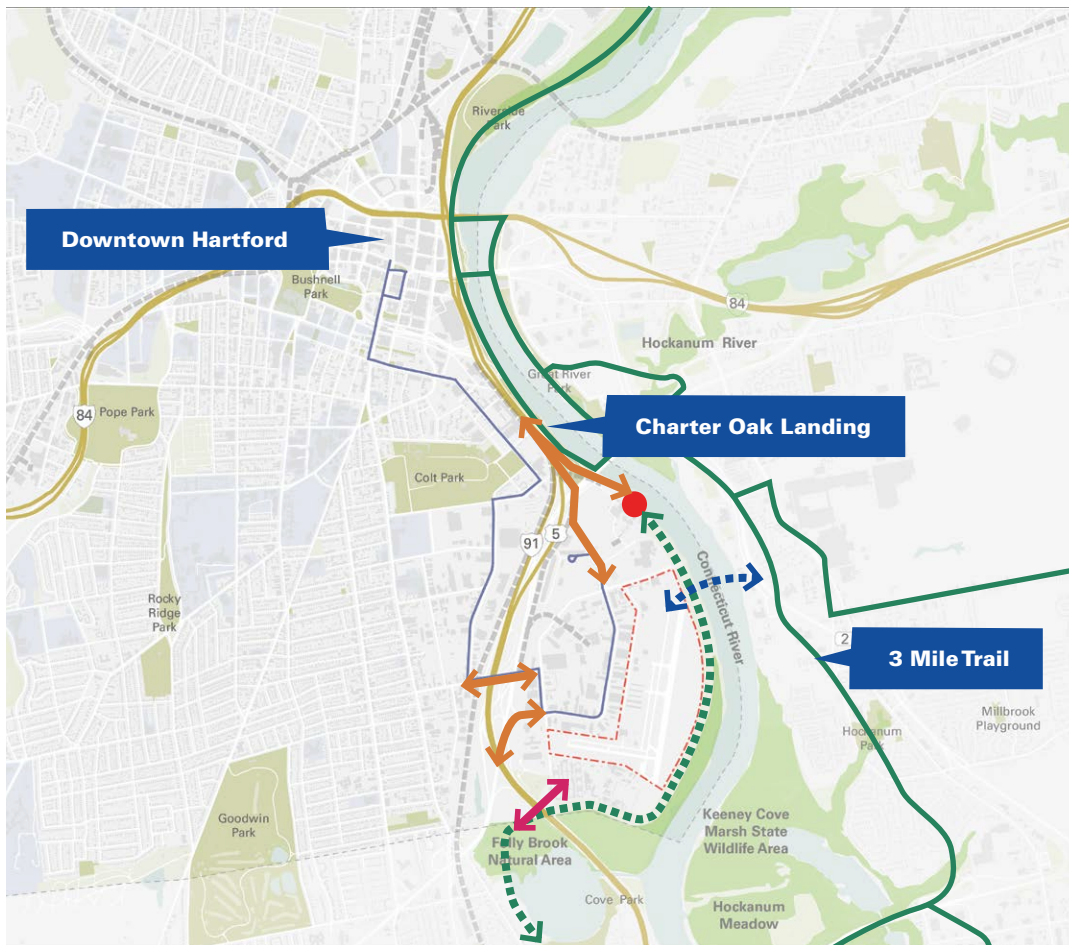
The map below illustrate key potential connections and opportunities to enhance trail connectivity and links to open space, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure

Existing Connections

- Greenway/Trail
- Site Bus Connection
- ↔ Under Highway Vehicular Access
- ↔ Under Levee Pedestrian Access
- Waterfront Obstruction

Potential Connections

- - - Potential Future Greenway Connection
- - - Potential Pedestrian Bridge Connection



Charter Oak Connection



MIRA Plant: Missing Link



Connection under Levee



Inaccessible Levee Path

Development Paradigms

Based on community input, interviews, market analysis, and dialogues with City leadership, the team established three potential development paradigms to test on the site:

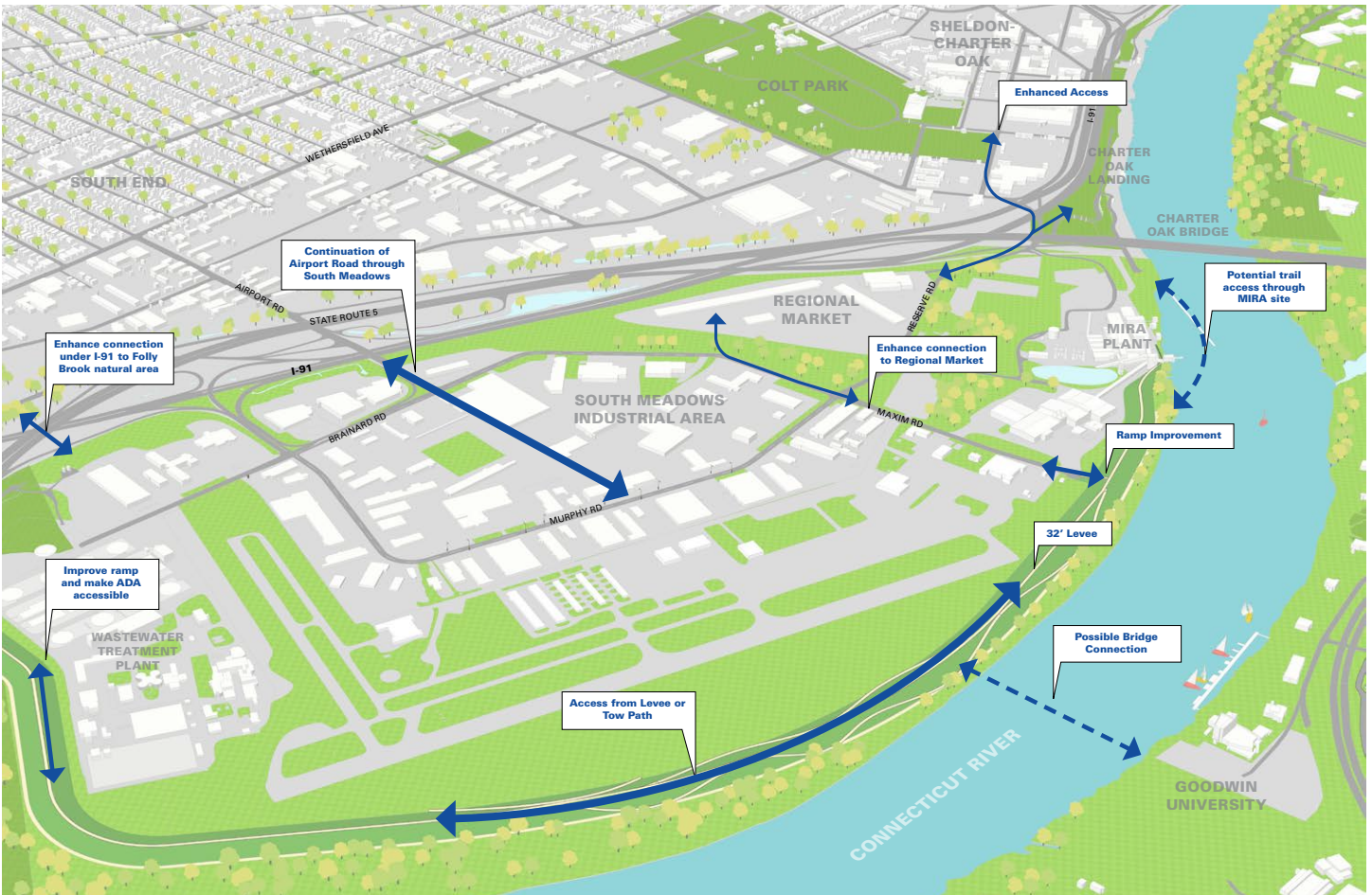
- 1) A Logistics & Distribution Center
- 2) A Mixed Use Activity Center
- 3) An Advanced Manufacturing, R&D, & Aviation Technology Hub

These three paradigms, while not the only potential uses of the site, were chosen as prototypes because each represents a distinct alternative to the current use and was determined to be viable based on public outreach and market conditions. Whenever possible, the team considered combining multiple uses on the site and makes reference to synergistic uses that could

be explored in combination with the primary uses illustrated in the report.

One of the key findings of the study, and a key takeaway from the outreach process, was the importance of connectivity and open space. As a result, the report explored open space and recreational uses as a public benefit overlay as part of each paradigm and as a strategy to enrich regional and local connectivity, while opening access to the riverfront for Hartford residents. This study recommends exploring ways of increasing access to the Connecticut River, including the levee and the tow path, in the near term. Increasing access would immediately enhance the public value of the site, while creating riverfront recreation opportunities for surrounding neighborhoods and the region.

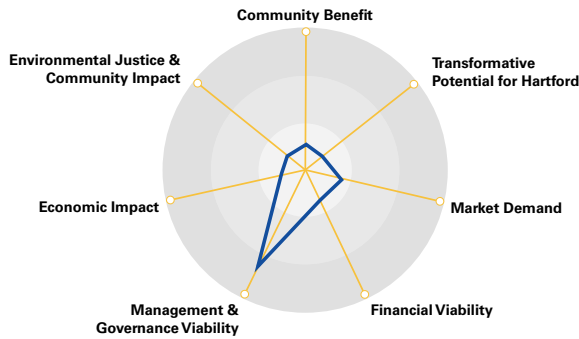
Existing Site



Development Paradigms Summary

Existing Use | Airport

Maintain the existing use of the airport, but explore opportunities to enhance site access, economic viability, and open space connections.



Site Extents

Pros

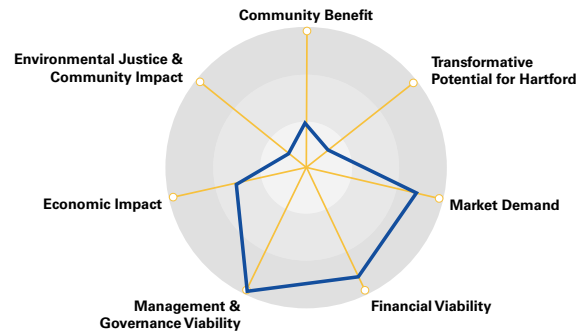
- Could still allow for north-south riverfront trail and general access improvements in South Meadows even if no redevelopment occurs
- Fosters local aviation industry, workforce training, and small companies
- Provides airfield for single and twin-engine recreational flight
- Maintains emergency functions for health and security (may also be possible under alternative redevelopment scenarios)

Cons

- Annual operating loss of \$500,000 - \$1M (CAA)
- Lost potential development opportunities in tandem with Regional Market and MIRA Plant
- Continued pollution and negative environmental impacts of air travel
- Low site utilization with lack of access to the riverfront for Hartford residents

Logistics & Distribution Center

Reimagine the airport as a logistics and distribution hub, taking advantage of strategic regional connections while complementing nearby light industrial uses.



Light Mfg. & Ind.
Logistics & Distribution

Pros

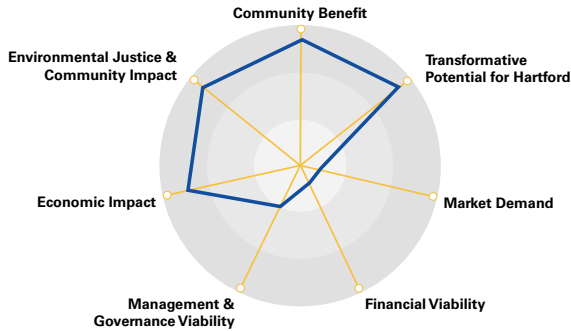
- High market demand and financial feasibility
- Low barrier to entry
- Relatively minimal infrastructure costs
- Middle wage/middle skill jobs
- Potential for public benefit overlays and riverfront access
- Compatible with existing South Meadows Industrial Area uses

Cons

- Increased truck traffic and pollution
- Loss of "catalytic" site with broader economic development potential
- Potential for traffic bottlenecks at key access points
- Low employment densities
- Highly space consumptive

Mixed Use Activity Center

Reimagine the airport site as a mixed use development with residential located near the river, signature open spaces, and new commercial and entertainment venues.



Light Mfg. & Ind. Residential / Mixed Use
Commercial / Office / Retail Event / Entertainment / Rec

Pros

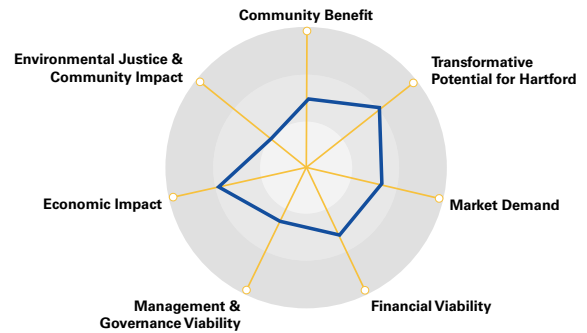
- High community benefit
- Significant open space and connectivity, including potential pedestrian bridge connections and trails
- New amenities, including retail, office, mixed-income housing, entertainment spaces
- Potential catalyst for citywide development with positive spillover effects
- Generates potential for adaptation of MIRA plant and connections to Sheldon-Charter Oak Landing
- Potential for increased connection to East Hartford marina

Cons

- Residential development may be isolated from the rest of the city, despite potential new trail connections
- Lack of financial feasibility under current market conditions
- High up-front investment in environmental remediation, infrastructure, etc.
- Adjacent uses less compatible with mixed use development, including MIRA plant and wastewater treatment plant.
- Challenging staging of infrastructure requirements

Advanced Manufacturing, R&D & Aviation Technology Hub

Rethink the airport as a testing ground for new aviation technologies, from drones to automated vehicles, taking advantage of region's rich research and development ecosystem.



Adaptive Reuse Food & Beverage Mfg. Light Mfg. & Ind.
Advanced R&D Aviation / Drone Testing

Pros

- Leverages connections to adjacent regional hubs and knowledge centers
- Takes advantage of existing FAA designation as airfield
- Strengthens industrial core of South Meadows with potential positive spillover effects to the larger area
- Create opportunities for new niche light manufacturing industries like brewing and food production
- Links to Regional Market revitalization strategy

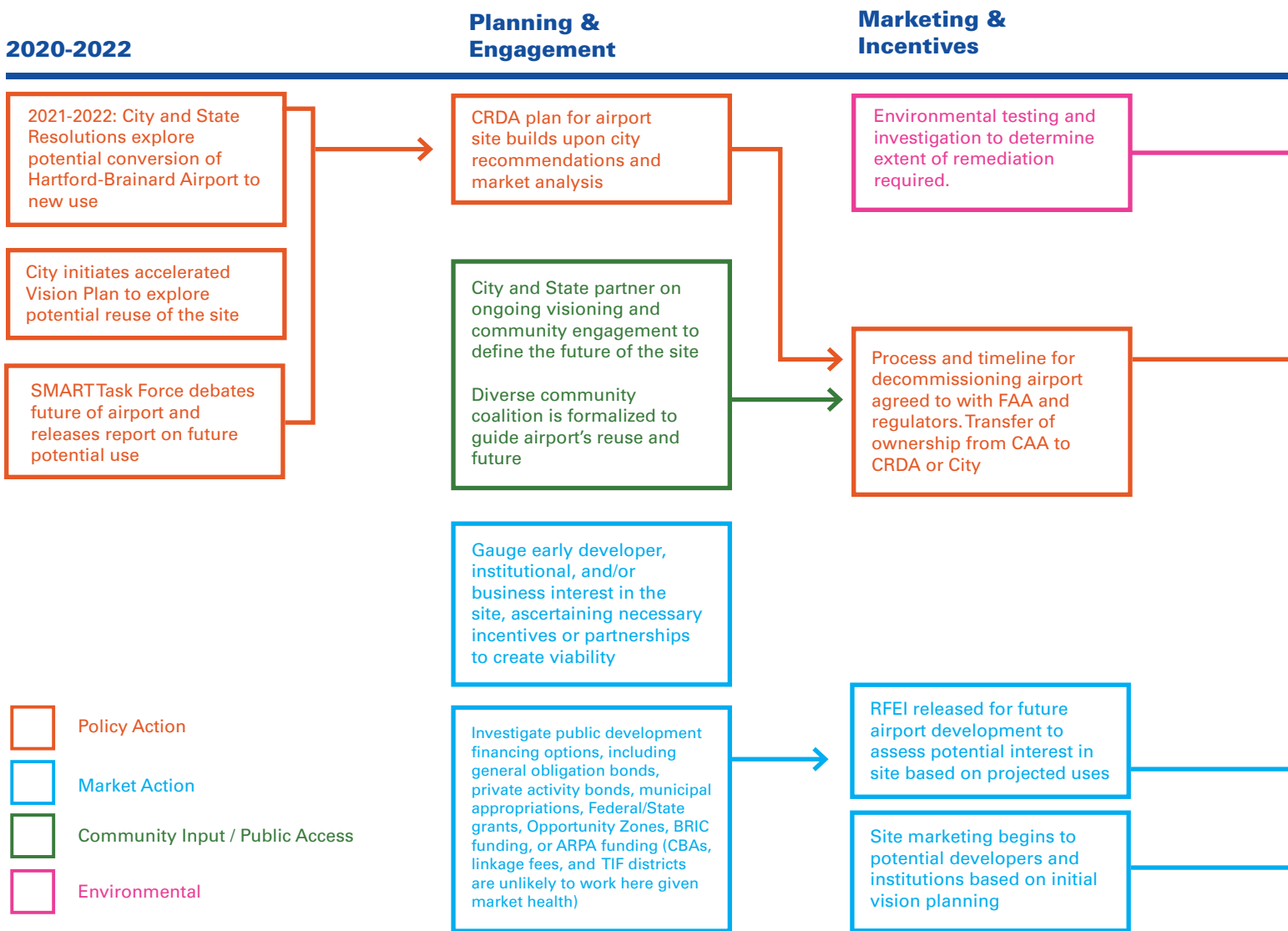
Cons

- Closure of airfield to recreational pilots may be challenging if site remains open to drones and helicopters
- Speculative market and unproven economic value for testing sites
- Research positions may not benefit working class communities, depending on structure of job growth plans and community benefits
- Large portions of existing site remain relatively underutilized

Implementation & Next Steps

The development paradigms set forth in this report reflect three illustrative potential visions for the future use of the airport. Each of these uses will require a unique implementation timeline and strategy, demand further study, outreach, and engagement, and necessitate strategic partnerships to bring them to fruition.

While each of these scenarios necessitates different sets of analyses and considerations, certain baseline steps need to be taken for all of these options. Suggested next steps are illustrated in the hypothetical implementation timeline below.



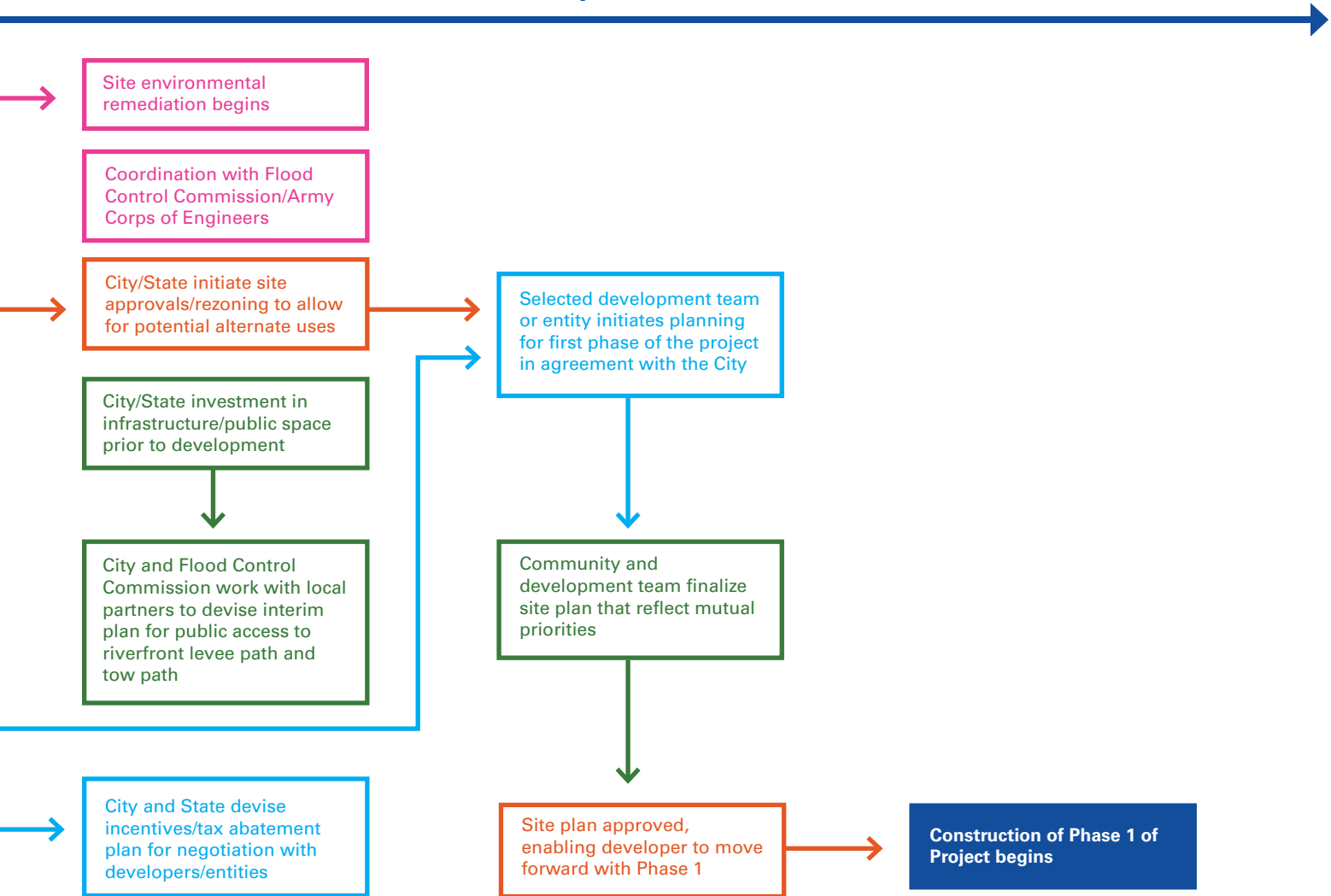
Critical Near-term Action Items

- Align with DECD and the State on planning goals and scope for future study on airport reuse
- Build on SMARTask Force by organizing a coalition of key stakeholders to guide the future development of the airport
- Assess impacts and economic potential of study uses, including any unforeseen obstacles, permitting concerns, etc.
- Present report and next steps to community stakeholders, elected officials, and developers

Site Preparation & Infrastructure

Site Planning & Development

Construction



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